Negotiating Secularity: Indira Gandhi, Ānandamayī Mā, and the Eliya Rajah of Travancore

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In February 1971, Indira Gandhi's new Congress Party gained a landslide victory in unexpectedly called mid-term elections. Within a year, the Indian Constitution had been amended to withdraw the privy purses and privileges granted to the rulers of the erstwhile princely states when they acceded to the Indian Union at Independence in 1947. Mrs. Gandhi, the prime minister, signed and dated the Constitution (Twenty-Sixth Amendment) Act on July 31, 1971. On December 28 that year it became law.

It was in this context that, in early July 1971, Uthradom Thirunal Marthanda Varma and his family flew the two thousand kilometers from Bangalore in southern India to the capital Delhi. The Eliya Rajah, as Marthanda Varma was known, was the younger brother and successor-in-waiting to the, by then, titular Maharajah of Travancore in modern Kerala. With his family, he went by car first to the Hardwar *āśrama* and then two days later to the Dehradun *āśrama* of a female "godwoman" named Ānandamayī Mā. This is the account that the Eliya Rajah later wrote of what happened that night:

> I retired for the night by about 9-30 p.m….It must have been around 11-30 or 12 midnight that I became wide awake for some unknown reason. I am absolutely certain that all vestige of sleep had left me. There was a glow outside my window. I sat up and looked out and beheld: "The entire space as far as the eye could see was a brilliant

International Journal of Hindu Studies 20, 2: 159–198

DOI 10.1007/s11407-016-9189-2

blaze of light." I recollected the words of the 11th chapter of the Bhagavad Gita…: …"The space between the heavens and all the quarters are filled by you alone." The experience is very clear in my mind but I struggle to find words to convey what I saw. This wondrous sight was Mother—encompassing the boundaries of my vision fully and completely; Mother, magnificent, lustrous and universal; Mother in Her *Mahimā* form but as always seen by us, and most remarkable was the radiance in and around Her hands in which She held Padmanābha Bhagavān (Varma 1983: 319–20).

Ānandamayī Mā holding Padmanābha.
Photo courtesy of Christopher Pegler.

Padmanābha Bhagavān, seen in this vision, was the state deity of Travancore. In the great Padmanābhasvāmī temple in Thiruvanantapuram (Tri-

vandrum), he takes the form of Lord Viṣṇu lying on the cosmic snake Ananta. The creator deity Brahmā emerges from the lotus in his navel (*padma-nābha*), and his right hand indicates the deity Śiva in the form of a small *liṅgam*. From 1750 on, Padmanābha had been not only the deity but the legal head of Travancore (see below). While steps were being taken to remove the nineteen *lākh* rupees' annual privy purse from his family, it was this protector of their realm whom the Eliya Rajah saw in his vision, held safe in the cosmic lap of Mā. She herself appears as "that Mighty Being" from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (Varma 1983: 320), Kṛṣṇa as Viṣṇu in his universal form.

Intertwining Paths

In this article, I investigate the intertwining paths of these three figures—Indira Gandhi (1917–84), Ānandamayī Mā (1896–1982), and the Eliya Rajah of Travancore (1922–2013)—to see what they, specifically, reveal about the complex ways in which religion and politics have interacted in the modern Indian nation-state. I proceed by demonstrating that my three protagonists—in projections of themselves in biographies, in the writings of devotees, in the Indian press, and on the web—may be seen as exemplifying the rather different discourses of secularity (Indira Gandhi), spirituality (Ānandamayī Mā), and servanthood (the Eliya Rajah). I conclude, however, that if we trace the interrelations of these discourses and their contestations, we detect a convergence on a discourse of service in the ways in which they negotiated secularity in the twentieth-century Indian nation-state. Of course, the discourse of *sevā* as social service in the struggle for Independence, its roots in service to the *guru* and the divine, its use in contestations of what the Indian nation should be, and its subsequent pervasiveness in *hindutva*-linked discourse and organizations have been well studied (Beckerlegge 2004, 2006, 2011; Watt 2005; Srivatsan 2006; Patel 2010). Rather than reconsidering the macropolitics of this, our vignettes will concentrate on the crisscrossing networks of our subjects, the "flows" between them (Copeman and Ikegame 2012: 5), and the implications of these flows for evaluating service and secularity through these relations. To construct my argument, I look first at Indira Gandhi, Ānandamayī Mā and the Eliya Rajah in turn, and analyze the type of discourse I have associated with each of them. I then turn to the interconnections.

Indira Gandhi and Secularity

I have associated Indira Gandhi with a discourse of secularity for a number of, fairly obvious, reasons. While the Preamble to the Constitution was not amended until 1976 to describe India as a "socialist secular" as well as a "sovereign democratic" republic, India was positioned from the time of Independence to be a secular state by contrast with Pakistan. What "secular" means—and whether particular governments, including Mrs. Gandhi's, have actually acted in compliance with this—is, of course, contested. In an Indian political context, the term "secular" primarily "demands that the state be equidistant from all religions" in the sense of "refusing to take sides and having a neutral attitude towards them" (Sen 2005: 295–96), not the total separation of state from religion as imagined, at least in theory, in, say, France. It is important to note that the former only requires that, in legal and political terms, the state does not favor particular religious groups.

As prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi had a public duty to act and help shape policy in such a secular manner, a duty to which her private preparation had been directed and which she appeared scrupulously to observe: she visited places of worship across the religious spectrum (Masani 1975: 277; Jayakar 1995: 364, 483), received a wide range of religious leaders, made pragmatic alliances with non- and anti-religious parties in and out of government, and explicitly opposed the Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. This was not only because the Jana Sangh was one of her fiercest political opponents. It also stemmed from her personal experience of Partition and working, at Mahātmā Gandhi's behest, in Muslim refugee areas of Delhi to try to get peaceable Hindus and Muslims to meet, which for her then was already a form of Gandhian service (Gandhi 1980: 52–57, compare page 82 for her definition of "secular"). Moreover, the majority of her numerous biographies portray her as secular, either overtly projecting her simply as a political figure, whether adulated or heavily criticized, or making little mention of her own religious views. Several emphasize that she, like her father, was even-handed or had no religious position, her controversial marriage to Feroze Gandhi, a Parsi, being given as an illustration (Bhatia 1975: 96–99; Frank 2005: 171, 175–76; compare Gandhi 1980: 42).

But this is not the whole story. Pupul Jayakar (1995), her posthumous

biographer, cultural advisor, and close friend, while saying relatively little on Indira Gandhi's religious views, does give us glimpses and through these portrays what a conflicted person she was. For Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira's father and first prime minister of independent India, "secular" connoted not only even-handedness in the realm of policy, but also being "rational" and "antisuperstitious." His letters to the young Indira exude both these senses, and her upbringing, partly in Europe, was designed to inculcate these understandings (Nehru 1938: 40, 50, 1962: 37–40 *et passim*; Gandhi 1989: 96, 131; Bhatia 1975: 53; Jayakar 1995: 136). Indira, however, was also Kamala's daughter. Her mother, a doughty freedom fighter like her father, though subject to persistent ill-health, was deeply religious, took initiation from a Ramakrishna Mission *svāmī*, and was a devotee of Ānandamayī Mā, as we shall see later. Moreover, as a child, Indira spent time with her grandparents while her parents were campaigning or in jail. It turns out that her father's mother, Swaroop Rani, portrayed by Jayakar (1995: 7, 10, 52) as a rigid and highly orthodox Kashmiri Brahmin, also visited Ānandamayī.[1] With psychological and moral needs generated from her dislocated childhood in this renowned political family as well as from the political pressures of being in government, from attack as Congress split, and during the Emergency from being arraigned with her son Sanjay on corruption charges, and when Sanjay was killed, it is perhaps unsurprising that Mrs. Gandhi sought consolation from various spiritual guides—Ānandamayī Mā, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Vinobe Bhave, among others. And that she did so, as a private individual, was not in itself incompatible with her secular public duty to maintain equidistance from all religions in legal and political terms.

But, as Christophe Jaffrelot (2012) brings out, Indira Gandhi did not always keep these relations private and hidden. Taking advantage, like many other modern politicians (and not only in India), of the public "photo opportunity," she sought legitimation from these respectable *guru*s, just as they in turn gained legitimation from her. We shall see below how this modernized and semipublic "king-Brahmin" format worked in relation to Ānandamayī Mā, a figure to whom Jaffrelot devotes only one sentence. There was, however, another level of Mrs. Gandhi's relations with *guru* figures that Jaffrelot classifies as "secret." These included the performance of a Lakṣacaṇḍī Tantric ritual begun in 1979 when Sanjay's life was under threat. Jaffrelot implies that such connections were kept concealed because

they were somewhat dubious; one might surmise that they could also be seen as antirational or "nonsecular" in her father's sense, perhaps even as weak, hence Mrs. Gandhi's desire to keep them secret. However, Jayakar (1995: 470) states that it was her "advisors" who persuaded Mrs. Gandhi to have the Tantric ceremony performed. While she may have been trying to distance Mrs. Gandhi from an antirational practice, the implication is that in the wider political context, the power of religious ritual, whether (semi-)official or secret, was still in some quarters held requisite for political power, not least when the latter was under threat.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding her growing fascination in later life with the power of the Goddess and her married family's Kashmiri deity Śārikā (Jayakar 1995: 483), Indira Gandhi, unlike the Eliya Rajah and other erstwhile rulers, publically eschewed ritual (Gandhi 1987: 70) and did not practice *sevā* as a devotional activity to a divinity. For her, daughter of Nehru, Congress politician, service was to the nation, as encouraged by her early Gandhian-inspired activities and expressed in her last public speech. As a teenage pupil in Poona, she pushed her school into adopting a Harijan community to support; in the 1950s, as chair of the Indian Council for Child Welfare, she set up an arts center for underprivileged children in Delhi and a place for street children to be taught a craft which could support them in later life (Jayakar 1995: 49, 144), echoing earlier uplift agendas. In her speech to Congress, when she secured the party leadership on January 19, 1966, she referred to herself as a "*desh sevika*," a servant of the nation like her father,[2] while on her resignation as prime minister on March 22, 1977, following the suspension of the Emergency, she declared: "Since childhood my aim has been to serve the people to the limit of my endurance. This I shall continue to do" (Jayakar 1995: 326). Finally, on October 30, 1984, on the day before her assassination, she told a crowd in Orissa:

> I do not care whether I live or not. I have had a long life and if I am proud of anything it is that I spent the whole of my life in service…. And as long as there is breath in me so long will I continue to serve, and when my life goes I can say that every drop of blood that is in me will give life to India and strengthen it (Gandhi 1987: 78).

For this woman, service and secularity were two sides of the same rhetoric.

Yet, as Jocob Copeman argues (2004: 132, 135–36, 139, 140), the discourse of feeding India with her blood drew, at a deep level, not just on the language of martyrdom and sacrifice, but on that of *pūjā* patterns—shared *prashad* to nourish her recipients, politics in a religious idiom, used later and overtly to promote blood donation in her name. Secularity here was being negotiated in a language that reverberated by a leader who courted support across religious divides.

Ānandamayī Mā and Spirituality

The discourse of spirituality centered around Ānandamayī Mā and her teachings at first sight also transcends particular religious allegiance. Ānandamayī's foreign, mainly European, devotees stress that she was a person of great insight who encouraged every seeker who came to her to continue to follow their own religious tradition while listening to her spiritual teaching on detachment (Lannoy 1996; Lipski 1970: 56–57, 62, 1977: ix, 37). Many of Mā's Indian followers also use a discourse of spirituality rather than of specific religious allegiance when talking about her. Swami Nirgunananda, one of Mā's *svāmī*s based in Dhaulchina, explained to a French devotee: "One lady spiritual Christian aspirant came and asked Ma for spiritual guidance. Ma asked her about the spiritual doctrine she followed. The lady answered that she was a Christian. Ma said, 'I am also a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu.' Ma would always ask the aspirants to follow their own path and their scriptures."[3] Accounts stress that Muslims, Parsis, and others, as well as Hindus, were drawn to her. At a meeting to inaugurate a child welfare center, the governor of Gujarat, emphasizing that "Mataji's teaching was completely universal and applied to all men and women, irrespective of religion, sect, caste, class or nationality," stated that "he had made it a point to invite Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Mohammedans, Christians, Parsis…" (*Ānanda Vārtā* 19, 4 [1972]: 250).[4] A key devotee who organized her South Indian tours was a Parsi, Mrs. Taleyarkhan (*Ānanda Vārtā* 1, 2 [1952]: 66), while Bhai Talattuf Hussain became a follower after hearing of her in Mecca (Joshi 1981: 65). However, a read through Mā's hagiographies and the back issues of *Ānanda Vārtā* suggests the numbers of these were actually very small.

What is significant though, rather than the numbers, is precisely this discourse of spiritual inclusiveness itself. As Richard King (1999) shows,

it has its roots in nineteenth-century contestations as Indian thinkers developed a rhetoric of India's spirituality and inclusivism by contrast with "the West's" material and economic bias and Christianity's exclusivism. It is a common claim of many *guru*s contemporary with Mā, not least Ramaṇa Maharṣi and Śrī Aurobindo, two famous teachers whose *āśrama*s she visited on her first main South Indian tour in 1952. In Mā's case, it is underpinned by her followers' understanding of her as (the) transcendent, theologically and indeed politically. Her wanderings took place according to her *kheyāl*, or divine will—literally "at will," it often seemed—though later her journeys were planned so devotees knew where they could take *darśana* (Hallstrom 1999: 99, 52). Mā is portrayed as free of attachments, "this body," as she referred to herself after her spontaneous initiation,[5] unlimited by the normal constraints of bodily existence. It is this theological transcendence which justified, albeit to the frustration of some of her followers, what seemed like political indifference, with Mā refusing to comment on any of the great political challenges of her day.[6] This spiritual discourse seems ideally developed to position Mā in a secular society, equidistant from all specific religions, allowed by a non-interfering state to pursue her divine *kheyāl* to the benefit of her followers' personal needs; to be, in other words, what Roger Ballard (1999) and others (compare Juergensmeyer 1982) have referred to as a "panthic" *guru*, sought out by individuals as their own guide to truth, in her case, their Mother, irrespective of their family religious tradition or religio-political identification.

Yet once again it is not so simple. The work of King and others (for instance, McKean 1996; Suthren Hirst and Zavos 2011: Chapter 8) already indicates the political embeddedness of this vocabulary of spirituality. This is confirmed when we consider the way Mā is presented in a birth centenary collection entitled *Ma Anandamayee: Embodiment of India's Spiritual and Cultural Heritage* (Guha 2005). In addition, her political location and association with Hindu orthodoxy becomes apparent the more closely we look at her *kheyāl*-directed tours and the ritual contexts in which she and her ascetic followers functioned. We look at the birth centenary volume first.

Perhaps the clearest statement comes in Siddheswar Prasad's brief article, "Shree Shree Anandamayee Ma's Contribution to the Cultural and Spiritual Heritage of India for the Benefit of Mankind" (2005). Note the

universal reach of the title as well as the Indian grounding. The former is echoed when he summarizes the latter: "Ma Anandamayee personified the essence of India with its spiritual values, sacrifice and tolerance. Her appeal has cut across barriers of caste, creed or religion and drawn people from all sections of the society" (46–47). However, this is framed in a modern Hindu exposition of cultural heritage: the four *puruṣārtha*s, the Vedas, and a gallery of recent (Hindu) "*sādhaka*s" from Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṃsa and Svāmī Dayānanda to Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mohandas K. Gandhi, including Śrī Aurobindo and Ramaṇa Maharṣi on the way. An even more explicit Hindu trajectory of Mā as "Jagat-Guru" (World Teacher, see below) is given by Bireshwar Ganguly (2005: 78) who specifically emphasizes her frequent participation in annual *pūjā*s to a wide range of Hindu gods and goddesses and at recitations of multiple Hindu texts, from the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, epics, and goddess texts to "*Chitanya Chritamrita*" (*sic*)—the well-known hagiography of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava, Caitanya Mahāprabhu, revered by his followers as the embodiment of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. So, while the claims to transcendence and tolerance, universalism and inclusiveness, are firmly grounded in a specifically Hindu narrative, they recreate a discourse of Indian spirituality which tends to silence the very contributions of those of "caste, creed or religion" who do not fit this homogenized tale.

A mention of Muslims in the Centenary collection shows the dangers of this. Bithika Mukherjee, Mā's loyal follower and writer of many biographical works about her, emphasizes the significance of Mā's presence in distressing times, through her meeting with common people and "the scholars,…the political leaders, the Princes and the Sadhu-Samaj of our country," giving "direction to the keepers of our tradition when they stood at crossroads of modernity and the ancient heritage" (2005: 88; *pace* Nirgunananda above). However, she introduces this with a quotation from a devotee, uprooted from Dhaka at Partition: "The implanted seed of hatred for the Hindus in the Muslims [planted by British divide and rule policy] was so nurtured under the leadership of Jinnah that it had grown into a gigantic tree which threatened to darken the horizons forever" (87). The devotee's fear appeared to be not so much for the loss of lives in the "terrifying carnage" as that "in the divisive holocaust whatever is distinctive in the tradition of Bharatbarsha would perish" (87). This is what must be rescued, not a critique of the polarization which such images foster.

Universal spirituality is not quite so compatible with equidistant secularity as it initially appears.[7]

From B. Ganguly's article, we already have a sense of the orthodox Hindu ritual world in which Mā circulated. The accounts of "Mātri Līlā" (Mā's play or doings), given at the end of each issue of *Ānanda Vārtā*, confirm that her wanderings were organized around numerous scriptural recitations and festivals, an intrinsic part of her own play as well as of her followers' devotion. That it was "play," or *līlā*, the freely chosen activity of a deity for the benefit of his or her devotees, is theologically key to her followers. But this did not mean that orthodoxy had no place. For Mā, it was important to allow her ascetics to follow their strict ritual requirements to the letter (compare Gurupriya Devi 1985: 84). Her justification was that others should not be made to stumble as they sought the freedom from such requirements that she enjoyed. Moreover, foreigners seemed to delight as much in the great *pūjā*s as did her Indian followers, for Mā's *bhāva*s, or ecstatic displays of divine immersion, showed her nature as bliss to which they were so attracted. So it is important to note that I am not arguing an anti-Hindu case here, which would be just as crude as the anti-Muslim sentiments cited above. Nonetheless, we can see two different but intimately related levels of discourse functioning, the one stressing Mā's transcendence to and inclusion of cultural diversity, the other her embeddedness in a particular narrative of India as Hindu, a narrative which, as Sen (2005) has shown, mitigates against secularity when held to apply in the political and legal domains. This is particularly clear when we look at Mā's tours and the location of her *āśrama*s. First the *āśrama*s.

While two are now in Bangladesh, the majority of Mā's *āśrama*s are situated in the northern part of India, with two in West Bengal, one in Orissa, one in Gujarat. Pune is the furthest south.[8] They tended to be established near key Hindu pilgrimage sites, or on Himālayan pilgrimage routes, or elsewhere proximate to her wealthy, often princely devotees. Apart from Dhaulchina on the pilgrimage route to Mount Kailāsa, which, according to Nirgunananda and Christopher Pegler,[9] Mā selected herself, the locations were chosen by people she authorized, thereby becoming part of the discourse. As well as being beautiful places, they facilitated her connections with key ascetics, *sādhu*s of the Sādhu Samāj mentioned earlier, which she joined in 1944 (A. Ganguly 1996: 35). Their Nirvāṇī

Ākhāṛā accompanied her in Kumbhmelā processions in 1974, 1977, and 1982, while *mahātmā*s frequently graced her *āśrama*s. Powerful Hindu regrounding of the transcendent *kheyāl*.

Kheyāl also, as we have seen, directed her wanderings in the narrative of transcendence. If we look at her tours of South India, we find a different theme. An anonymous first visit in 1930 with her ascetic husband Bholanath and a few close followers[10] was followed by a 1952 tour of key Hindu temple sites and pilgrimage places and visits to holy men, orchestrated by some of her *svāmī*s. Already she was attracting support among the elite including Hindu princely families, such as the Eliya Rajah who came from Travancore to applaud her (*Ānanda Vārtā* 1, 2 [1952]: 67; Varma 1983: 319). It is difficult to read the reports of this event in *Ānanda Vārtā* without discerning echoes of the *digvijaya*s of ascetics of old. These were tours of the "four directions," modeled on the victory tours of a king's conquest and enthronement (Bader 2000: 139), showing the reach of their teaching as *jagat-guru*s across the whole of the Indian land mass. Replete with political resonances, ancient and modern, the *digvijaya* cues India as Hindu, mapped out by the Mother on her *sādhu*-provided route.

If secularity, then, is a way of relating the politics of the state equidistantly to religious traditions, but is led by a prime minister who gains legitimation from being photographed with Hindu *guru*s and uses Tantric ritual in a political crisis, and spirituality is presented as a transcendent search, yet maps a Hindu India through the offices of Mā's *svāmī*s and claims political impact through her association with the largely Hindu elite, we start to see the way these discourses interconnect. The Eliya Rajah of Travancore gives a further twist.

Marthanda Varma, the Eliya Rajah of Travancore and Servant of Padmanābha

Our third character I associate with a self-proclaimed discourse of servanthood. In 1750, an earlier Marthanda Varma (1706–58) put the ancient ruling lineage of Travancore on a new footing. In the act of "*thrippadi danam*," laying down his state sword and other emblems of royalty on the holy step of the sanctuary, he donated the state to Lord Padmanābhasvāmī, the tutelary deity of Travancore, and declared that henceforth, the

deity would be the legal ruler and all subsequent *rājāh*s his *dāsa*s, or servants (Lakshmi Bayi 1995: 113–16). At the accession of each, the new incumbent would present himself to the massive image of the deity in the Trivandrum temple and emerge bearing the laid-down sword of state which symbolized his (or indeed her) servanthood (see, for example, page 136 of Lakshmi Bayi). Either a Brahmin or the ruler himself carried that sword when he went to the temple for his worship (406). Our Marthanda's brother followed this ritual practice from his accession in 1931. When he died in 1991, our Marthanda, now simply the titular head of the family, did the same. Moreover, both during his lifetime and in his recent obituaries (he died on December 16, 2013), Marthanda Varma, "known for his simple lifestyle and humility,"[11] was widely eulogized not just as a servant in name, but in all that he did: his personal and daily devotion, asceticism, and commitment to his people[12]—a worthy successor to those heads of what was regarded as one of the most progressive of the former princely states (Patil 1981: 62)[13] and true "servant of the lord."[14]

As ever, there are other sides to the story. Vocal opponents saw Marthanda Varma as "servant" of nothing more than his family and personal interests, siphoning off riches from the incredible wealth of the Padmanābhasvāmī temple vaults[15] and ordering that the contents of those vaults be photographed back in 2007, while claiming divine sanction against the opening of Vault B in particular when the Kerala High Court ordered the opening of all Vaults A to F in January 2011.[16] The Supreme Court having given an order to open all except Vault B in July 2011, further objections were made when the expert committee appointed by the apex court recommended the opening of the infamous "Vault B" in March 2012.[17] Marthanda Varma's position in the ruling family and his intervention, leaked by a disgruntled temple servant, was portrayed as depriving the poor of Kerala of wealth that duly belonged to the state and its people.[18] By contrast, Narendra Modi, aspirant prime minister of the Bharatiya Janata Party, visiting the temple in September 2013 as part of his long run-up to national election victory in May 2014, accepted a picture of the temple and a "crown" of gold and red silk, meeting the Eliya Rajah as the guardian and servant of a, perhaps even the, Hindu state,[19] while the president of Guruvayoorappan Bhaktha Samithi drew the Rajah and temple into the well-known Hindu right narrative of Hinduism under attack.[20] It is, however, via the continuing Supreme Court case over the

temple—since it is a case in which the deity himself participates as a legal minor[21]—that we turn to the complicated background relating to discourses of servanthood and secularity in the Indian nation-state since Independence.

In June 1947, with the Independence of British India approaching and the position of the princely states still contentious, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel entrusted the secretaryship of a new states department to V.P. Menon with the task of negotiating accession to the Union with the 562 princely states (figure from Menon 1961: 84). Many acceded to the Indian Union quickly, a few to Pakistan. However, on June 11, 1947, C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar, the Dewan of Travancore, had declared it would constitute itself as a sovereign independent state (Menon 1961: 87), the Nizam of Hyderabad following suit the next day. While Travancore did accede at the eleventh hour, Menon's problems with integrating it were not over. In early March 1949, in one of Menon's meetings with Travancore and Cochin about their future, the Maharajah explained his resistance to integrating with Cochin: "he governed the State on behalf and as a servant of Sri Padmanabha and…attached great importance to this position being maintained….[If] the Government of India still insisted on the integration of the two States he would rather abdicate than act against his convictions" (265). Menon comments: "The devotion of the present Maharajah to Sri Padmanabha borders on fanaticism; he rules the State not as its head but as a servant of the tutelary deity" (267). The discourse of servanthood is seen to stand obstinately in the way of full integration into a democratic secular state, by contrast with the ready agreement of the ruler of Cochin who was "prepared to efface himself completely in order that his people might enjoy a larger life" (269). Clearly, in Menon's strongly Congress view, service should be to the people, not to a deity. However, to achieve the Union of Travancore and Cochin, on July 1, 1949 Menon was able to negotiate a form of wording parallel to clause 159 of the Constitution and agreeable to Chithira Thirunal, the then ruling Maharajah of Travancore. He would not be forced to take the clause's unacceptable oath of allegiance to the Government of India, but only be required to give his "solemn assurance" to uphold "the Constitution of India and that of the United States of Travancore and Cochin" and to "devote [him]self to the service of the people of India" (267): this was servanthood to the people of the secular state, so far as Congress was concerned; a continuing ability to act as

servant of Padmanābha for the good of his own land and people, in the Maharajah's eyes.

We jump to 1967. On June 25, following a general election in which some Congress seats were lost to princely rulers standing as candidates for the Swatantra Party, the All-India Congress meeting made a resolution to abolish the privy purses of all previous rulers. Further impetus to this was given in late autumn 1969 when Indira Gandhi's wing of Congress came under pressure in the Lok Sabha from both the more socialist-inclined "Young Turks" and a splinter group, the Old Congress, led by S. Nijalingappa, who sought to oust the prime minister. Adopting the "Quit Poverty" slogan to attract support, her New Congress, later to split again and become Congress(I), included the abolition of the privy purses among a wider range of social reforms. On December 20, the Rajya Sabha voted nearly unanimously in favor of abolition of both the privy purses, which had been negotiated as part of the Union settlements, and the princes' privileges. Vocal opposition from the Concord of Princes, a complex constitutional situation, and the later defeat of the actual Bill in the Rajya Sabha led Indira Gandhi to request the president of India to take direct action in derecognizing the princes, which in turn led to a challenge from the princely side in the Supreme Court. Only the landslide victory of Congress in the February 1971 mid-term elections, noted at the beginning of this article, allowed the Constitution (Twenty-Sixth Amendment) Bill to be passed in both houses, becoming law at the end of the year.

For Travancore, a state which had remained aloof from negotiations with the Concord to indicate its higher status, the issue of accommodating the demands of the secular nation-state was again complicated by issues of servanthood. Derecognition was of princes as heads of their erstwhile states. But in Travancore the head of state was Padmanābhasvāmī. By implication, then, derecognition of the Maharajah, his servant, meant derecognition of the deity and his protection of his territory for the good of its people. Further, the removal of the princely purse entailed the loss of land to support, and police to safeguard, Padmanābha's temple (and its wealth), a financial burden which then fell to the family itself who had to resort to recruiting new guards from the existing temple staff and adapting the temple for income-generating schemes. Was unhappiness about this merely the complaint of a feudal elite? Or was it due to the central state's rejection of a centuries long spirituality of service? Paradoxically, even

after 1971, the deity, tacitly derecognized, continued to be allowed to act as a legal petitioner in the Indian judicial system, right up to the Supreme Court, and under Hindu law to be recognized as a legal person, "a live entity capable of owning and possessing property."[22] At the very least this graphically shows the ambivalent relations between religion and secularism which those who interpret the latter in a more explicitly anti-religious way find hard to stomach. In the next section, we explore more fully the relations between, first, Indira Gandhi and Ānandamayī Mā, then the Eliya Rajah and Mā, to focus in on the role of a modern *guru* amidst these conflicting forms of discourse and to detect signs of their convergence on a discourse of service.

A Prime Minister and a Guru

It is worth noting at this point that, although Christophe Jaffrelot (2012), Princess Gouri Lakshmi Bayi (1995: 187), and Orianne Aymard (2014: 38, 110, 152) refer to Ānandamayī Mā as a *guru* of Indira Gandhi's, many of Mā's followers themselves reject this term. Two main reasons are given: the more important is that she is rather "Mother," who herself embodies the teachings of the Guru (capital G), that is God, or Bhagavān; the second is that she never (or rarely) gave initiation to renouncers, the typical role of the *dīkṣā-guru*, expecting her ascetic followers to take initiation from a recognized *svāmī*. Nonetheless, as one who was believed to impart the Truth through Mā-bānī (her teachings) and who thus attracted a circle of lay and ascetic followers, she was often spoken of as a *guru* by other followers (Hallstrom 1999: 144) or those less closely associated with her. She also shared a milieu and key characteristics with other modern *guru*s,[23] so here I retain the term "*guru*" as an analytical category of religious studies with justification in wider Indian usage. Whether Indira Gandhi saw Mā as her *guru*, and if so of what type, we now explore.

A Family Friend

Indira Gandhi's first encounter with Mā in 1933 at Dehradun, while her father was under house arrest at Mussoorie by the British, is normally attributed to her mother Kamala (see, for example, Malhotra 1989: 42). However, it seems that it was Swaroop Rani, her strict paternal grand-mother, who met Mā first, dropped off by her daughter-in-law and grand-

daughter on their way to see a film! Mother and daughter were persuaded to go the next day,[24] and Kamala undoubtedly took Ānandamayī as one of her spiritual guides from then on. Whether Indira regarded her as such, she certainly saw her as a supportive family friend.[25] Indira visited Mā not only with her mother, but with her father at various times, after her mother's death in 1936 and later (1981 and 1982) with her own daughter-in-law Sonia, grandsons, and son Rajiv. Indira specifically invited Mā to Anand Bhavan, her ancestral home in Allahabad, on several occasions, notably in February 1964 when Nehru had had a stroke, and to meet herself with Sanjay, Rajiv, and Sonia in September 1968. Moreover, photos across many years show Mrs. Gandhi wearing a *mālā* of *rudrākṣa* beads around her neck, often described as a gift from Ānandamayī to Kamala which Mrs. Gandhi wore as a keepsake of her mother's.[26]

A Public Legitimator

Mā's relations with Indira Gandhi as a member of her dynastic family went considerably further than this, however. We have already seen Jaffrelot's claim that Indira gained legitimation through her "respectable" *guru*s and indicated that this was a mutually beneficial relationship. In Mā's case, that this worked particularly to the benefit of the Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha, which she permitted but did not establish herself, is very clear. A website authorized by the Sangha, a rich source of information about these encounters, contains the telling remark recorded on August 29, 1959, in Delhi: "Pd. Jawarhar Lal Nehru comes to Kalkaji Ashram to meet Ma. *Several famous photographs taken even without his knowledge*."[27] The scrupulously secular Nehru clearly did not wish to use this as the kind of photo opportunity that his daughter later did. But the site, based on Sangha publications, wants continually to emphasize Mā's link with politicians, princes, and key *sādhu*s to showcase her centrality to, and importance in, these higher echelons of society. Records of Mrs. Gandhi inaugurating various Sangha-led institutions in the "divine" or "holy" presence of Mā—for example, Mata Anandamayee Hospital in Varanasi on December 26, 1968, the Pauranic Research Institute in Naimisharanya on July, 21 1981, and the Charitable Dispensary at the Kalkaji *āśrama*, Delhi on February 26, 1982—not only support this but explicitly foreground the Sangha's *sevā*, involvement in social service-type activities in education and health which are typical of many modern Hindu *guru*

organizations (Beckerlegge 2006) and may now act as porous spaces of overlap with similar activities of the Sangh Parivar (Alder 2015). At the very least they promote a discourse of modern Hindu service which most recently emphasizes the role of nongovernmental religious organizations in complementing the role of the state through such "secular" civic provision (Ikegame 2012).

However, photos of the association between Mā and Indira Gandhi are not limited to this website. While unsurprisingly, given their approach, the majority of Mrs. Gandhi's biographers do not include them, those more sympathetic to personal material do. In her second block of photographs, Jayakar includes two informal pictures of Indira with Jiddu Krishnamurti in December 1980, a more formal one of her sitting at the feet of Vinobe Bhave "after her defeat at the polls in 1977" (compare Jayakar 1995: 336–38), and a rather shy undated one of her standing with Ānandamayī Mā at the Hardwar *āśrama*. Aymard, who stresses from the opening page of her book Mā's connections with leading politicians, includes as Figure 1.2: "Mā Ānandamayī with Nehru (right) and Indira Gandhi (left) who became her disciple" (2014: 44). All are standing. Aymard emphasizes that the link with the wealthy and intellectual adds visibility to a *guru*'s cult, yet also mentions, perhaps a little misleadingly, their embarrassment in "receiving guidance from" an illiterate rural woman. If this might well have applied to Nehru himself (and it seems that he could not really be said to have specifically sought out her advice),[28] his daughter seems to have been comfortable to be photographed sitting at Mā's feet, as at Krishnamurti's, acknowledging her authority. Uma Vasudev's biography specifically heads such a photo: "At the feet of Anandmayee" (1974, third batch of photos).

A Political Advisor

Does this necessarily mean, however, that Indira Gandhi saw Ānandamayī as a specific source of political advice? We know that she turned to Jiddu Krishnamurti and even the Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchi for such during and after the Emergency (Malhotra 1989: 193, 212; Jayakar 1995: 348).[29] Did she also turn to Mā? It seems that in a letter she wrote to Mā shortly after she became prime minister, she confided in her about the problems of being in high office and may, at that early stage, have been looking to her for such advice. In her reply to Indira, on August 6, 1966, Mā said to

the devotee who penned the letter for her:

> Write to her: Yes, what Indu has written about happenings in this country at present, its condition, its worry is painful. The difficulties of the topmost servers in charge are enormous. Always keep in mind: It is He Himself who manifests in all kinds of different ways….Whatever He causes one to do should be performed as a service, acting as His instrument… (*Ānanda Vārtā* 32, 2 [1985]: 97–98).

Mā acknowledged Indira's political difficulties but replied in terms of devotional service, and this seems to have been her consistent approach.

Even more clearly, Indira Gandhi must have consulted Mā when, having lifted the Emergency, she and her party were trounced at the general election in March 1977. In a letter dictated from Kishenpur, on April 2, 1977, Mā instructed:

> Write to Indu Ma: When it is a question of protecting one's life, one's reputation, one's wealth, one's people—the most important things [*sic*] is to save one's life. What you have been able to accomplish after one year, what you have done according to your own wish is the service of God in the guise of men. You have not bothered about your personal sorrow, bereavement or happiness. Your desire to serve God in human beings has now been fulfilled… (*Ānanda Vārtā* 32, 2 [1985]: 98).

This spiritual gloss was not, it would seem, the view the country held of her after two years of oppression. It did, though, render Indira Gandhi's long-reiterated commitment to serve the nation in a higher key: service of "men" as service of God, at a point when the nation itself had turned against her, the Emergency being seen as in the self-interested protection of her own power and of her son Sanjay following the Maruti scandal.[30]

If that was as specific as Mā's advice got, Indira Gandhi, like other politicians, nonetheless clearly sought Mā's blessing for her own political goals. In 1978, with Mrs. Gandhi's fightback campaign against the Janata Party, Congress(I) successfully gained the state assemblies of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Devraj Urs, chief minister of Karnataka, then arranged for a by-election to the Lok Sabha from Chikmagalur by persuading the incumbent to stand down. On October 6, 1978, Mrs. Gandhi

filed her nomination papers (Jayakar 1995: 363). On October 9, she wrote a short note in Hindi to Mā from Delhi: "Ma, Remember me, please! I am going into a great fight. Give me your blessings! Yours, Indira" (*Ānanda Vārtā* 32, 2 [1985]: 101). On a 76 percent turnout, she won by 70,000 votes (Jayakar 1995: 366, 367).

A Personal Space

That Indira Gandhi needed quiet space away from violence, threats, and political pressure is hardly surprising. Immediately after polling day for Chikmagalur, she took refuge at the Ramaṇa *āśrama* at Arunachal, which Mā herself had visited back in 1952 on her tour. From the Anandamayee Sangha's official list and other passing references, we know that Indira also went to Mā for solace. In 1976 during the Emergency, for example, as India came to be seen by the outside world as a dictatorship, while Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was calling for elections in Pakistan, "She felt a total isolation. She visited Anand Mai Ma and wept before her" (Jayakar 1995: 309). The most telling stories, however, emerged in an interview with Swami Nirgunananda. He related that one night, as part of Jhūlan Pūrṇimā at the Delhi *āśrama*,[31] Indira Gandhi came to Mā at about 11:30 pm with no security at all. In the temple, she asked to touch the swing, strictly against orthodox purity rules. "I saw her poor face. She is the Prime Minister of India and wants to do this with love. Ma said, 'Sprinkle Ganges water on her! Allow her to do that.' You cannot imagine. She was just like a child. A very small kid."[32] In another incident, behind the scenes when she had come to open the dispensary in 1982, she asked to push Mā's wheelchair. "She was like a child. Almost crying. Is this the all-powerful lady?"[33]

A Spiritual Guide?

We have seen that there is some disagreement over whether Indira Gandhi regarded Ānandamayī Mā as her *guru*. Aymard says she was a disciple. Jaffrelot takes Mā as her first *guru*. Jayakar's presentation of her would indicate that she might have been. However, according to Vasudev, Mrs. Gandhi specifically denied that she was: " 'I don't believe in her for the spirituality and all that,' she hastened to say. 'She's a very good friend. It's as a friend that I meet her. She was a great friend of my mother's. So I feel a bond. She's a very comforting person to be with, but there's nothing religious about it. At least, she's not like that with me' " (1974: 310,

citing Indira Gandhi). Given the date of Vasudev's publication, did Mrs. Gandhi's view change later? Was it simply politic for Mrs. Gandhi to put it as she did? Or should we take her comment at face value? There seems no doubt that Mā dispensed to Indira the same kind of spiritual advice she gave to all. Equally, the comfort that Indira derived from her presence seems clear. She took every opportunity she could to fit in to her enormously busy political schedule visits to Mā around the country. And she and her family members were reportedly the last visitors to whom Mā spoke before leaving her body.

In tracing their links and the interweaving of the discourses of secularity and spirituality, religion and politics, it is perhaps sufficient to note the following of this secular seeker and self-envisaged servant of the nation: the multivalence of a private personal relationship; the need to keep this from the secular-appraising eye; the contradictory desire to display it before the *guru*-approval-seeking political elite and those for whom king-Brahmin patterns continued to resonate; and the linking of a mission to serve all with one who could declare the grounding of that service to be beyond simple human power. For Mā's Sangha it was also vital that such a politician should declare, on July 25, 1978, that "it is the outstanding good luck of India that a great Being like yourself dwells in our midst" (*Ānanda Vārtā* 32, 2 [1985]: 100), for through this we see Mā's links with Indira Gandhi being cast in terms of the spiritual and cultural heritage theme once again. The Eliya Rajah's variation is in a different key.

A Prince and a Guru

A Devotee

In her book on the Padmanābhasvāmī temple, Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, the Eliya Rajah's sister's daughter, clearly identifies Mā as his spiritual guide:

> The present Valia Thampuran [senior-most male member of princely clan, that is, Marthanda Varma] does daily Puja to his personal idol of Sree Padmanabha on Ananta. It is a living miracle that this silver idol of amazing brilliance was seen gaining in weight. His *Guru Sree Sree Ma Ananda Mayee*, explained that devotion is the food of Gods and his depth of devotion had led to this enhancement in weight (1995: 187n381, emphasis added; compare Varma 1984b: 111–12).

After Mā's death in 1982, *Ānanda Vārtā* published numerous eulogistic articles about her, including a three-part account of his fifteen experiences of Mā written in English by "H.H. Marthanda Varma" himself (1983, 1984a, 1984b). Through these, it becomes clear that after the vision of July 1971 with which we started, both his wife and he became ardent lay devotees of Mā. The pair traveled to be with her for as much time as possible, attributed many miraculous rescues both large and small to her power, and enjoyed visiting key Hindu pilgrimage places and bathing with her at the 1977 Allahabad Kumbhmelā in association with visits to her *āśrama*s. They were particularly pleased when she gave them personal *upadeśa*, the teaching which showed she had accepted them as her lay disciples. As members of the princely elite who enhanced her profile of devotees and at the same time humble followers who slipped from the limelight into the crowds, their personal dedication and service to her seems to have been without question.

The Gift of Padmanābha

That this dedication was triggered by Marthanda Varma's July 12, 1971 vision of Mā holding Lord Padmanābha is clear. It was strengthened two days later when Mā invited him to take his "Deities" to her room before he left for Delhi. He unpacked the *vigraha*s, or "Concrete External Presences as Form," which he kept in a special *pūjā* box so he could worship them when traveling. Mā "adored" all the "*Bhagavān*s." Next morning she was found on her bed lying "just like Padmanābha Bhagavān on Ananta" (Varma 1983: 322), and on July 24 the Eliya Rajah was asked to arrange for Mā to have a Padmanābhasvāmī *vigraha* for herself. Her *kheyāl* was that it should be installed on September 29, 1971, the ninth day of Durgā Pūjā in North India that year. This was a key festival for Mā, for it was at Kālī/Durgā Pūjā in Bengal that she first manifested as the Goddess in a *bhāva* in 1925 (Hallstrom 1999: 44). The Eliya Rajah recalls: "Permission was taken from my brother to be absent at the *Dussera* as the installation (*chal pratishta*) of *Padmanābha Bhagavān* was all important" (Varma 1983: 323). Nambudiri Brahmins were sent from Trivandrum to perform the installation correctly and to instruct Mā and her followers in the exact ritual requirements for the *sevā* of the deity. After the image was placed on the Durgā Pūjā platform for consecration, the Eliya Rajah duly carried the deity in procession, first to Mā in Panchavati, then to the Kalyanvan

cottage which no one had been allowed to stay in "after Padmanabha had graced it with His presence last July" (*Ānanda Vārtā* 18, 4 [1971]: 191). This became his temple, in which Mā took daily interest, walking up and down the steep hill to attend to the deity's needs (191). As it happened, because of a difference in the North and South Indian religious calendars that year, the Eliya Rajah was able to be back in Trivandrum for the Vijayā Daśamī all-important tenth day celebrations of Daśahrā, which had long been connected with the celebration of royal power in the erstwhile princely states.[34]

Three key points emerge. The gift of Padmanābha is couched as due to Mā's *kheyāl* in both the Rajah's own account and that of the author of "Mātri Līlā." The political circumstances of the withdrawal of the privy purse are not mentioned. The regional princely political context of the Daśahrā celebrations, requiring permission for absence, and Padmanābha's status as tutelary deity, mentioned in the Mātri Līlā account (*Ānanda Vārtā* 18, 4 [1971]: 191), are nonetheless there in the background. This is all consonant with the general stance of the Maharajah and his brother around and after Independence, remaining aloof from party and central government politics, unlike many other former princes who sought to reassert their influence by standing as members of state assemblies, or the Lok Sabha, or the Rajya Sabha (Hurtig 1988). This distance, paradoxically, instantiated both their higher status as one of the more prestigious princely states and its root in servanthood to Lord Padmanābha himself, now the desired deity of one of the great "saints" of modern India, Mother of all, universal divine, who personally identified with his needs[35]—and legitimated the family's devotion.

Ritual and Regional Identity

The privy purse withdrawal is, however, noted by Lakshmi Bayi as background to the January 1972 Lakshadeepam celebrations in Trivandrum to which Mā was invited by the Eliya Rajah, following the installation of Padmanābhasvāmī the previous Durgā Pūjā. A fifty-six-day festival for the prosperity of the kingdom culminating in the lighting of thousands of lamps, and now marketed for tourist purposes as coming from "God's own country,"[36] in 1972 it was controversially lit by electricity for the first time, the Maharajah having reluctantly sought astrological permission from Padmanābhasvāmī before making this change, which was necessary

to cut expenditure (Lakshmi Bayi 1995: 170–71). Portentously the princess declares, "It has to be stressed here that on the 31st of December 1971 midnight, the Indian Government passed yet another enactment abolishing the Privy Purses promised to the Ex-Rulers. With one stroke, Chithira Thirunal lost Rupees eighteen lacs annually" (173), most of which was used by him for the temple's upkeep. It is in this context that the Maharajah and his brother led the processions, stopping on each circumambulation to honor Mā after Padmanābhasvāmī (Eye Witness 1972: 112–13). For her devotees, it was a clear sign of their Mother's transfixing power; for the Eliya Rajah, it was the opportunity in a private ceremony later to place his own "twin" *vigraha* of Padmanābhasvāmī in Mā's lap, replicating the vision. Interviewed nearly forty years later, with the temple wealth under consideration in the Supreme Court and the subject therefore *sub judice* under "western systems of jurisprudence," he would gently but firmly refuse to answer the interviewer's questions, according to "the tenets of the principles of somebody else's law."[37] While complying with these, he clearly implied that his allegiance remained elsewhere—to *Manusmṛti* and to the deity whose service was in the "past tense, the present tense, and, we hope, the future tense."[38] Highly educated, keen photographer and scholar, patron of cultural and religious charities, Mercedes Benz fan, and devotee of Mā, the Eliya Rajah negotiated the discourses of the secular courts, his deity's service, his spiritual goal, to the end of his life.

Linking the Three?

In Indira Gandhi, we had a secular leader, often loved by the crowds but slated for her authoritarianism, who kept spiritual discourse and her visits to *guru*s concealed except where association with Ānandamayī Mā and others promoted her public and political legitimation and service to the people. Her father led the Congress government which deprived the Eliya Rajah's brother of being the actual Maharajah of Travancore in 1947, and the Rajapramukh in 1950, while her New Congress government removed his princely purse and privileges. In the Eliya Rajah, we have a servant devotee, who openly pursued his spiritual search with Ānandamayī as his *guru.* It was macropolitical discourse at both national and state levels that he kept distanced; discussions of the factious politics of communist and

communalist Kerala, including the imposition of two periods of President's rule, make little or no reference to the ruling family. Yet, in his own terms, he was committed to what he saw as appropriate political leadership through service to the seven thousand plus square miles of Travancore and its people. He lived that out against the Congress-orchestrated macro-political backdrop described above and in the Indian courts. He divided opinion between those who saw him as a humble ascetic-living servant of the Lord and those who regarded him as a feudal remnant exploiting his family position and temple access to the detriment of those in need.

Ānandamayī Mā was an ambiguous common link. Both Indira Gandhi and her family and the Eliya Rajah and his contributed to the prestige of her elite networks. This "flow" confirmed her power as the one who advised rulers and leaders to seek the One beyond the mere sociopolitical. Her transcendence of worldly concerns could be seen to be vindicated in that rulers with such different political interests were nonetheless attracted to her and at different levels placed their affairs, in the Eliya Rajah's case literally, in her hands. Yet, as this shows, her claimed transcendence of the sociopolitical belied her deep embeddedness within it. Moreover, her connections with multiple politicians were largely confined to Congress, even if, over time, different Congress factions were involved.

It was at Mā's birthday celebrations in May 1979 that the paths of all three of our protagonists crossed. Over the years, these celebrations had become elaborate extended affairs and were often hosted by prestigious followers. In 1979, the Congress(I) state governor of Karnataka, Govind Narain, and his wife, who with his family had been long-term devotees of Mā, were honored to joint-host the celebrations in Bangalore (Narain 1979).[39] Their cohosts were the Eliya Rajah and Rani, at whose family estate at the Maharaja Gondal Palace Mā stayed in a specially built secluded cottage. The Eliya Rajah and Rani were present throughout, from May 5 to 16.

That year, Mā's birthday ceremonies were opened by the Śaṅkarācārya of Dwarka, one of the four main Śaṅkarācāryas who had just met together in Sringeri on Śaṅkara Jayanti, May 1, for the first time in "1200 years" (Narain 1979). In a statement, the Śaṅkarācāryas declared their support for the Freedom of Religion Bill going through Parliament, spoke out against conversion, commended the Janata prime minister Morarji Desai for bringing cow protection high up the political agenda, and encouraged

weddings for all Hindus with full Hindu rites but otherwise little expenditure.[40] Their statement was apparently anodyne and inclusive; actually it encoded a discourse strongly linked with an "India as Hindu" platform, a view we noted above as instantiated in other contexts by Mā's links with key Hindu ascetics.

Indira Gandhi, who sent apologies if she was unable to make Mā's birthday ceremonies, this year did attend, probably on May 11 when she was in Bangalore to address a meeting of her own Congress(I) supporters.[41] From her point of view, it would seem to have been a private visit to Mā to seek solace; perhaps, though, it was also to ensure that she continued to grace such gatherings as the face of Congress(I), given their weight of potential support. She was, of course, at this juncture out of power as prime minister and had also been expeled from the Lok Sabha as member for Chikmagalur, Karnataka, in December 1978, shortly after Devraj Urs, the chief minister, facilitated her election. Her political situation was, to say the least, fraught.

With little support in the Lok Sabha, Indira Gandhi was by this time also being opposed behind her back by former supporters including Devraj Urs. Press reports show clearly that in the days around her visit to Mā's birthday celebrations, and following the Grover Commission report on Urs's corruption, she was campaigning in Karnataka to get Urs removed from his position as president of the Karnataka Congress on the (contentious) grounds that he should not hold this post as well as being chief minister of the State.[42] On May 13 she was flying back to Delhi for the anti-Special Courts Bill Congress(I) rally on May 16.[43] On May 17, that Special Courts Bill, brought in to facilitate proceedings against herself and her son Sanjay, received presidential support. In June the Special Court summoned her to appear, and she filed an application for a stay order in the Calcutta Supreme Court (Jayakar 1995: 381–82, 385). In the midst of all this, the Ānandamayī website serenely reports: "The programme attended by renowned spiritual figures of the South as well as by Smt. Indira Gandhi."[44] Govind Narain ensured the former included a Buddhist and a Jain, as well as Śrīvaiṣṇavas from Udipi and a range of other Mahāmaṇḍaleśvaras from Hardwar and Rishikesh (*Ānanda Vārtā* 26, 3–4 [1979]: 214). The discourse of (inclusive Hindu) spirituality is uppermost, its political context below the surface, with Mrs. Gandhi remaining, among Mā's followers, a powerful secular seal.

Spiritual and Secular Service

To observe the complexity of the interrelationships of religion and politics through the lens of two elite figures and a common *guru* necessarily entails a very partial view. However, taking such a specific focus has allowed us to approach our topic from a variety of angles to track some of the key "personal connections, transactions and flows of…spirituality" (Copeman and Ikegame 2012: 5) involved in the highly diverse modern "political culture of Hindu religion," to return in conclusion to Ikegame's formulation (2012: 47).

At a basic level, as a politician from a leading dynastic family, Indira Gandhi's own needs were, to a large extent, always shaped in a political arena, and the same might be claimed of the Eliya Rajah, who, despite his ascetic lifestyle, remained very much in the public eye, not least through his cultural and social activities. That Mrs. Gandhi consulted Ānandamayī Mā, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Vinoba Bhave, and the Śaṅkarācārya of Kanchi, among others, on how she should act in times of political crisis and indecision locates this counsel in the political realm, in a manner not inconsistent with the ruler's consultation with his or her *rāja-guru* in a "presecular" context. This is the Brahmin-ruler paradigm Jaffrelot (2012) adduces, though it is important to remember that the particular instantiations of this varied enormously as studies of the princely states under colonial rule indicate (Ikegame 2013; Singh 2007; Waghorne 1994). While perpetuating such a paradigm might seem at odds with secular equidistance, the paradigm was in theory designed to ensure that the ruler governed for the well being of all his people. With Mā in "Brahmin" role, it allowed Kamala's daughter to glimpse a higher grounding for that well being and her service to it, confirmed by Ānandamayī Mā as service to the divine. As Nehru's daughter, she was simultaneously able to envisage this as secular service to the whole Indian nation. But in order to give that service, she had to be elected to serve. And Indira Gandhi, an astute politician who liked to make direct appeal to the masses, also knew the importance of connecting with her Hindu voters.[45] Sitting at the feet of *guru*s in photos for public circulation sent a powerful message: in a secular state under Congress, Hindu religious authorities and practices would not be decried.

The case of the Eliya Rajah is rather different. He and his family had

no particular need to present themselves as advocates of a secular discourse. Their own discourse of servanthood stood firmly in contestation to it, insofar as the deity rather than the secular state was the focus of their allegiance. For them, the issue was to find ways of maintaining that allegiance in changed circumstances, and it seems clear from our exploration that Mā's protection of and identification with Padmanābhasvāmī provided one way of envisaging that, so far as the Eliya Rajah was concerned. Servanthood to a tutelary deity and spiritual discipleship of a great living *guru* became complementary forms of discourse, ranged together against the discourse of a secular state which demanded conformity to a legal and political system presented as being at odds with this kind of view. Nonetheless, that the deity could be a participant in that legal system might be construed either as an attempt to maintain the equidistance principle or as a sign of the infiltration of that system with values deemed inappropriate in a secular age.

In viewing Mā as a modern *guru*, we see a continuing discourse of spirituality and cultural heritage rooted in the nineteenth century which strongly contributes to an "India as Hindu" picture, while emphasizing Mā's transcendence to it. Yet, throughout her life, the accounts of her Mātri Līlā and the many publications of her followers constantly stressed her links with secular politicians and princely families, as well as with notable *sādhu*s. In the diary of her life, given on the Ānandamayī website, the simple presence of these notables was enough to bear testimony to her divine power, showing how this eclipsed secular, princely, and religious power of lesser kinds, Indira Gandhi's and the Eliya Rajah's included. The links we have uncovered between our protagonists and the broader networks in which they participated demonstrate clearly their transactional nature as a form of mutual legitimation even in the secular state. They also suggest an oscillation necessary to maintain mass public support: for Indira Gandhi, an oscillation between scrupulous secularity and appeal to Hindu repertoires, not in themselves communal, but drawn on by those with such agendas; for Ānandamayī Mā, an oscillation between transcendent spirituality and the rich resources of Hindu devotion, themselves the source for those *svāmī*s with a more "India as Hindu" orientation too (compare also Aymard 2014).

Our close examination of the interconnections between these figures has, moreover, pointed to a range of subtle ways in which they all operated

the discourse of "service" across the religion-secular divide—a discourse in which contesting discourses of secularity, spirituality, and servanthood met and continue to do so. Ikegame (2012) shows how *sevā* has taken new forms in the social service enterprises of the Karnatakan *maṭha*s under a liberalized state. The Eliya Rajah's understanding of servanthood and the Anandamayee Sangha's *sevā* in medical and educational institutions show older forms of a "political culture of Hindu religion" (47). The Eliya Rajah's approach was inextricably linked with the political structures of Travancore and older beliefs that the people and land prospered when the king ruled well. It was, of course, primarily rooted in his service to Padmanābha. When he no longer held political power in the modern state of Kerala, he continued to perform that service in many ways: through devotional *sevā* to his deity, sanctioned by Ānandamayī Mā; through personal acts of patronage to his people; and through support of state and third sector welfare organizations, the focus of much modern *sevā*. The *Deccan Chronicle*, for example, records the story of a head load worker named Pushparaharan who was unable to work after heart surgery.[46] Each morning the Eliya Rajah drove past him on his way to worship Padmanābha. One day he stopped, and on discovering his circumstances found Pushparaharan a post in the royal palaces. At the news of Marthanda's death, the president of India stated: "His contribution towards the welfare of the people of Travancore as patron of numerous hospitals and charities shall always be remembered."[47]

As with the Eliya Rajah, for Ānandamayī too, and for the Sangha, the discourse of service had many shades of color. Although the Sangha's approach undoubtedly drew in part on Christian and colonial precedents, Mā's own Bengali heritage included a significant Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava strand where *sevā* to the divine involves service to others. While Hallstrom (1999: 101) distances Mā herself from a social service model of *sevā*, we have seen that Mā's letters to Indira Gandhi connect service to the nation with service to the will of the divine. In the early days of the Kanyapeeth girls' school, Mā emphasized that *sevā* to the divine helps purify the mind and should infuse all activity (Mukerji 2002: 212), and Alexander Lipski records Mā as saying: "Whenever you have the opportunity, give to the poor, feed the hungry, nurse the sick…do service (*seva*) as a religious duty and you will come to know by direct perception that the person served, the one who serves and the act of service are separate only in appearance"

(1977: 52, cited in Hallstrom 1999: 102). More recently, the Kanyapeeth's annual report emphasizes, in somewhat old-fashioned terms, that its Sanskrit foundation, "modern curriculum," and teaching of sewing, music, and cooking are intended "to make the [students] the ideal women of this country in the future."[48] Service and the nation remain conjoined.

Indira Gandhi's Congress-based understanding of service to the nation also had roots in Bengal in the political discourse of service to Mother India in the struggle for Independence (compare Nehru 1962: 3). Indira's own view was, as we have seen, strongly influenced by her relationship with Mahātmā Gandhi during her formative years and was energized throughout her life by contact with "the masses," the crowds of ordinary people who took her to their heart, even after the Emergency. It was encouraged, as we saw, by Mā whose high view of Indira's service must have heartened her greatly. Importantly, her publically stated commitment of service to the nation at key points in her office refused the monopoly of that term to political opponents with what she saw as partisan religious alignments. *Sevā* was not to be the sole prerogative of the Sangh Parivar and its associated political organizations in their continuing aim of building a Hindu nation, nor was it to be left to the institutions of civil society. In this, in intent, if not in execution, she followed her father's Congress in seeing Five-Year Plans and legislation as the key to appropriate service.

Recognition of the pivotal role of "service" in modern Indian political contexts is not, of course, new. Our close analysis does, however, help us identify the multiple different layers found in our protagonists' discourse for negotiating secularity, layers which continue to be of relevance in contemporary analyses of *sevā*. A first layer is provided by their strong notion of service as for the common good, whether that is enacted at the various levels of state or civil society, through organizations we would normally describe as "religious" or "political." This is found in all three of our protagonists and prompts us to question cynical views of service which see it simply as a matter of manipulation for a variety of self-interested agendas, whether political or other. It must, however, be tested in public debate on what constitutes the common good and on indicators for making progress towards this. That being said, cynical views do constitute a second strong layer in the discourse, whether articulated by Kerala communists in their critique of the Eliya Rajah's religiosity as a cover for his family's claimed appropriation of temple wealth, by advocates of *hindutva*

who see all Christian forms of *sevā* as attempts at conversion,[49] or, in parallel, by critics of *hindutva* who see any form of Hindu social service as serving its agenda. Its testing must continue in careful studies of particular situations and the readiness to refrain from repeated stereotypes but also to face unpalatable conclusions. A third layer, notwithstanding a need to reject ungrounded cynicism, is undoubtedly concerned with appeal to electorates or devotees, whether as *guru-sevā* with Indira Gandhi at Mā's feet or in the Sangha's presentation of Mā and its own activities. Whether this is adjudged manipulative, pragmatic, or multifaceted will depend on how the above evidence is read.

A fourth layer of the discourse which then needs analysis is that which draws on, and continues to feed into, Hindu "living traditions" of *sevā*, adapting notions of service to the divine and service to the *guru* into forms of social service. This then provides two further layers for investigation. In the fifth, forms of social service are linked with particular types of nation-building—whether through state legislation and child welfare societies in Indira Gandhi's Congress-linked vision, the Travancore Rajahs' regional resistance and patronage of local medical and educational institutions, or Hindu *sevā* for a Hindu nation. If we remember the first layer which speaks of "the common good," the test must be on who this fifth layer excludes. In the sixth, service to others, whether to one's community, nation, or humanity, is cast as service to God, either as a substitute as in early liberal discourse, or legitimated by it, as in Ānandamayī Mā's affirmation of Indira Gandhi, or as being none other than it, as Ānandamayī Mā's other statements, or the Eliya Rajah's understanding of servanthood suppose. This might then lead us to look for a seventh layer only hinted at in Ānandamayī's encouragement of all to follow their own religious traditions in the search for detachment and the divine: namely, the roots of service discourse in other "living traditions" in India, whether religious—Indian Islamic or Indian Christian, for example—or based in other identities, which articulate service differently or reject it altogether because of past hierarchy or oppression.

These layers are not, of course, discrete but overlapping, sometimes complementary, sometimes mutually challenging. What their analysis does show very clearly, however, is that the discourse of service resists a sharp demarcation between the realms of politics and religion. Understandings of what service does and should mean in a modern "equidistantly" secular

state will themselves remain fiercely contested. To what extent the concept can resist too strong a dye from certain shades of Hindu or indeed Christian *sevā* is a moot point and further study of its current employment in alternative Hindu, Indian Islamic, Indian Christian, communist, *dalit*, and other political contexts is a desideratum, as I have indicated above. However, while many might rightly want to separate (secular) politics from religion because of the deleterious effects that politicoreligious communalizing has, our vignettes and their interweaving discourse of service—spiritual and secular, to deity, kingdom, *guru*, or nation—show that driving a wedge between the two is not analytically helpful in seeking to understand the complexities of negotiating secularity in India today.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank participants in seminars at the Universities of Oxford, Chester, and Manchester who commented on various drafts of this article, especially my colleagues John Zavos and Mary Searle-Chatterjee, and this Journal's anonymous reviewers. Swami Nirgunananda and Christopher Pegler both gave very generously of their time and experience, and I am deeply grateful to them both.

Notes

1. Interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014, at the house of Christopher Pegler, an English devotee of Ānandamayī Mā.

2. "I have always considered myself a *desh sevika* (servant of the nation) even as my father regarded himself as the first servant of the nation. I also consider myself a servant of the party and of the great people of this country" (Gandhi 1985: 79). Note the resonance with the title of the Desh Sevika Sangha, a Gandhian organization for women which organized picketing and *khādī* production in the struggle for Independence (Forbes 2005: 45).

3. "Thoughts from the Himalayas: Conversations with Swami Nirgunananda," collected by Claire Landais, Dhaulchina (April 2002). Available at: www.anandamayi.org/devotees/Tfh.htm (accessed November 11, 2015).

4. *Ānanda Vārtā* is a quarterly magazine published since 1952 by the Shree Shree Anandamayee Sangha in English, Hindi, and Bengali.

5. This is a common feature among modern female *guru*s (Pechilis 2012: 114).

6. She was, however, reluctant to hold her seventy-fifth birthday celebrations in May 1971 "because of the sad plight of East Bengal" (*Ānanda Vārtā* 18, 3 [1971]: 135–36). Also, interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014.

7. Compare also A. Ganguly: "I am quite confident that the greatest Vedic Yajña, known as *Ati Rudra Yajna*, that [Mā] conducted in 1981, at Kankhal near Hardwar, will in due time, make India free of the evil effects of both Islamic and Western domination in the past" (1996: 39).

8. The southernmost was originally in Bangalore, where Mā's support included the Eliya Rajah of Travancore who had a residence there. It has now been given to the powerful Advaita *maṭha* at Sringeri which has the resources to maintain it (interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014) and has had long connections with the royal houses of Travancore and Mysore.

9. Interview with Swami Nirgunananda and Christopher Pegler, June 9, 2014.

10. Gurupriya Devi (1986: 58–60) gives a fascinating eyewitness account of the visit to Trivandrum and the Padmanābha temple where Mā's entrancement with Padmanābha seems to have started. She brought back ivory images from a privileged visit to the massive storehouse at the temple and distributed them to devotees. She had no contact with the royal family at that point, however.

11. *Mathrubhumi*, December 16, 2013.

12. *The Hindu*'s report was headlined, "State Mourns the 'King' of Humility and Simplicity" (December 17, 2013), a quote from the (Christian) Defence Minister A.K. Antony, one of the many politicians and religious leaders across the religious and political spectrum to acknowledge his austerity and outreach to all. Available at: www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/state-mourns-the-king-of-humility-simplicity/article5469670.ece.

13. See also, speech given by Archibald Nye, Governor of Madras, at the unveiling of a portrait of the Maharajah of Travancore on February 14, 1948. The speech is found in Varma, Marickar, Oommen, and Maheswari (2014: Kindle location 1647–1702).

14. *Deccan Herald*, July 2, 2011.

15. See V.S. Achutanandan, the then leader of Kerala's opposition, "Head of Former Travancore Royalty Accused of Smuggling," *Deccan*

Herald (August 20, 2011). Available at: www.deccanherald.com/content/185028/head-former-travancore-royalty-accused.html (accessed November 11, 2015).

16. See V.K. Shashikumar and J. Madassery, "Royal Lie? Kerala Treasure Temple Vault was Opened in 2007," *First Post* (September 6, 2011). Available at: www.firstpost.com/politics/royal-lie-kerala-treasure-temple-vault-was-opened-in-2007-77031.html (accessed November 11, 2015). Compare *Report of the Amicus Curiae* I.10, III.N.39, by Gopal Subramanium, October 29, 2012, submitted to the Supreme Court of India (Civil Appellate Jurisdiction), SLP (Civil) No. 11295 of 2011. Available at: www.thehindu.com/multimedia/archive/01262/Report_of_the_amic_1262649a.pdf (accessed November 11, 2015).

17. See *Times of India*, March 30, 2012.

18. See Padmanabha Das's statement annexed to the First Information Report No. 669, November 20, 2007, at the Thiruvananthapuram district Fort police station; and purported Temple vault opening circular 2, August 2, 2007. Available at: www.scribd.com/doc/64036166/Padmanabhaswamy-Vaults (accessed November 11, 2015). See also, *The Economist* (February 19, 2013); compare Jaya Prakash, "The Padmanabha Swami Temple: Myth and Reality. Part II," *The Modern Rationalist* (November 2011). Available at: www.modernrationalist.com/2011/november/page14.html (accessed November 11, 2015).

19. At Ānandamayī Mā's sixtieth birthday celebrations that day, Modi declared: "I bow to Amma and strongly believe that when we celebrate her 100th birthday, India will have become a Bhavya & Divya Bharat." See: www.oneindia.com/thiruvananthapuram/narendra-modi-event-in-amrita puri-kerala-live-updates-1312946.html (accessed November 11, 2015).

20. See *The Hindu*, September 27, 2013.

21. Compare Judgment of the Kerala High Court, January 31, 2011, Rendered in Writ Petition (Civil) No. 4256 of 2010 (*Uthradam Thirunal Marthanda Varma and Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple Represented by the Executive Officer* vs. *Union of India, State of Kerala, et al.*). Available at: judis.nic.in/judis_kerala/qrydisp.aspx?filename=188015 (accessed November 11, 2015). Also, *Report of the Amicus Curiae*, by Gopal Subramanium, October 29, 2012, submitted to the Supreme Court of India (Civil Appellate Jurisdiction), SLP (Civil) No. 11295 of 2011. Available at: www.thehindu.com/multimedia/archive/01262/Report_of_

the_amic_1262649a.pdf (accessed November 11, 2015).

22. *Report of the Amicus Curiae* II.41, compare Recommendation III.F.19, by Gopal Subramanium, October 29, 2012, submitted to the Supreme Court of India (Civil Appellate Jurisdiction), SLP (Civil) No. 11295 of 2011. Available at: www.thehindu.com/multimedia/archive/01262/Report_of_the_amic_1262649a.pdf (accessed November 11, 2015).

23. John Zavos gives one listing in his "The Public Representation of a Religion Called Hinduism: Modern Gurus, Sampradayas and Media Hinduism," paper presented at a session on "Modern Gurus, Sampradayas and 'Media Hinduism' " of "The Public Representation of a Religion Called Hinduism" Network, University of Manchester, July 8–9, 2009. Available at: www.mediatingreligion.org/sites/default/files/discussion%20paper.pdf (accessed November 11, 2015).

24. Interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014.

25. Mā referred to Indira Gandhi's children as her "little friends" in a letter to Indira, dated May 28, 1964, to console her on Jawaharlal Nehru's death (*Ānanda Vārtā* 32, 2 [1986]: 96).

26. This *mālā* has been subject to various constructions, not least that it broke before the 1977 elections and this was why she lost the election. Nirgunananda has dismissed such superstition and pointed out that Mā gave her (like others) various *mālā*s at different points in her life (interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014). Nonetheless, when Congress returned to power in December 1979 and people flocked to see Mrs. Gandhi at her Delhi house, Jayakar stresses that she stretched out her arms to them, "the *rudraksha mala* given to her by Anand Mai Ma around her neck" (1995: 394).

27. See: www.anandamayi.org/ashram/cc.htm (accessed November 11, 2015). Emphasis added.

28. Mā's letter to him in Hindi dated August 24, 1959 rather suggests he did not ask for this advice! "Pitaji…In order that the service to which you are now vowed [that is, 'service to the world'] and by which you are offering yourself as an oblation, may become completely successful, the power which lies dormant within you must be fully awakened….True, pure, enlightened, free eternal you are indeed—the One Himself…" (*Ānanda Vārtā* 32, 2 [1985]: 91–92).

29. Contrast Gowri Shankar, "Renowned Hindu Saint Begins Hundredth Year," *Hinduism Today* (May 1993). Available at: www.hinduismtoday.

com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=1026 (accessed November 11, 2015).

30. On the increasing centralization of power in Congress under Indira Gandhi's leadership and the undermining of local Congress organizations, see Mayer (1985).

31. Midnight commemoration of Mā's self-initiation is held on the full moon of the "swing-festival" for Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa preceding Kṛṣṇa's birthday (compare *Ānanda Vārtā* 19, 4 [1972]: 245–47).

32. Interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014.

33. Interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014.

34. *The Mail (Madras)* (September 8, 1970) noted the problem of celebrating Daśahrā in Mysore after derecognition of the princes, suggesting an image of Cāmuṇḍeśvari (the family goddess of the Wodeyar dynasty) should lead the procession instead. See also Sampath (2008: 685–88).

35. For example, Mā was found shivering when Padmanābha's yellow covering slipped from him one night, until this was discovered and replaced (Varma 1984b: 114).

36. See "Lakshadeepam–Padmanabhasway Temple, Thiruvananthapura, Kerla, India," YouTube video, 0:58, posted July 6, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3H3h3kKngY4 (accessed November 11, 2015).

37. See "Travancore Maharaja on Temple Treasure," YouTube video, 4:20, posted July 13, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=do2Ur9BCBkg (accessed November 11, 2015).

38. See "Travancore Maharaja on Temple Treasure," YouTube video, 4:20, posted July 13, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=do2Ur9BCBkg (accessed November 11, 2015).

39. Narain was also a recipient of a small Padmanābha *vigraha* from the Eliya Rajah. As a non-Brahmin, he gave it to Nirgunananda who did the *pūjā* for Padmanābha alongside his *pūjā* to Mā from 1985–2002 (interview with Swami Nirgunananda, June 9, 2014).

40. See *The Hindu*, May 2, 1979.

41. See *The Hindu*, May 13, 1979.

42. See *The Hindu*, May 13, 1979; *The Mail (Madras)*, May 14, 1979.

43. See *The Hindu*, May 16, 1979; compare May 10, 1979.

44. See: www.anandamayi.org/ashram/cc.htm (accessed November 11, 2015).

45. In the context of Congress being a "Hindu-dominated party" despite

its avowed secularism, Masani also notes: "Faced by a marked revival of Muslim communal parties and the prospect of losing crucial Muslim votes, Mrs. Gandhi has recently been making more energetic efforts to rectify her party's neglect of the Muslim community and of the Urdu language" (1975: 280).

46. *Deccan Chronicle*, December 17, 2013.

47. *Mathrubhumi*, December 18, 2013.

48. "Shree Shree Ma Anandamayee Kanyapeeth: Report (2006–2007)." Available at: www.anandamayi.org/ashram/adverts.htm (accessed September 19, 2014). The Ānandamayī website's main address has recently changed from <www.anandamayi.org> to <s577467547.websitehome.co.uk/> (accessed November 11, 2015).

49. See, for example, a 1999 anticonversion pamphlet by Ravindra Agarwal entitled "Sevā ke āṛ meṁ church kā ṣaḍyantra" (Church Conspiracy Under Cover of Service) (Sarkar 1999: 1691).

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